



# FOLKtalk

Issue 77  
Spring  
2025

**Friends of Leckhampton Hill  
& Charlton Kings Common**

*Conserving and improving the Hill for you*



Students from the Eco Committee of High School Leckhampton enjoy a short break in their November tour of the Hill.

*To find out more about what the students did on their visit - and how it helped them to understand both the site's history and the practicalities of the way it is managed - do have a look at The Word from Wayne on page 4.*

Welcome to the 77<sup>th</sup> edition of FOLKtalk. This Spring 2025 newsletter includes all the usual articles, but also reports on the FOLK AGM, the FOLK Quiz night and the Butterfly Conservation group's 2024 survey.

FOLK had its first meeting on the 26<sup>th</sup> of June 2000 at Leckhampton Primary School. Over the last 25 years many volunteers have endeavoured to work hard for the benefit of the Commons for conservation and the many users.

I have to report that FOLK was not successful in its nomination for the 2024 Kings Award for Voluntary Service. In the application details, it stated that only 50% of the nominees would be successful. The local success was Cheltenham Welcomes Refugees. I think they are worthy winners.

Local schools have shown a keen interest in eco issues, and over this academic year FOLK with Cheltenham Borough Council Green Spaces team will work with High School Leckhampton on two conservation work parties. Cheltenham Bournside School have also shown an interest in supporting conservation on the Commons and in the autumn term had a walk on the Commons with their new intake of students.

Thank you to the folk members that responded to my New Year's message. If you think you would like to become a FOLK volunteer in any small way please contact us on [www.leckhamptonhill.org.uk](http://www.leckhamptonhill.org.uk)



***Mike Donnelly, Chair of FOLK***

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## FOLK QUIZ NIGHT

The second FOLK quiz of the year was held on 22 November. The Wheatsheaf kindly let us use their function room free of charge and also very generously donated a raffle prize - Sunday lunch for two at the pub. Thanks go too to the many others who also donated prizes. If memory serves me right, there were around twelve teams of four. So combining the entry fee and the raffle we raised £300 pounds.

It was a tightly fought contest with two teams tying for first place and a tie break question (What is the population of Gloucestershire?) being needed to decide the winner.

I was helped during the evening by my friends Rick and Marina and, between us, Rick and I set the questions, including one round based on knowledge of Leckhampton itself. I think everyone enjoyed the evening and it was good to raise a pleasing amount to support FOLK's ongoing work on the Hill and Common!

Pete Niblett, Work Party Coordinator

# THE WORD FROM WAYNE

**Wayne Sedgwick, Senior Ranger, Cheltenham Borough Council**

## PROJECTS SUPPORTED BY THE NATIONAL GRID GRANT

The works described here are part of a large programme called **Restoring Cheltenham's Escarpment Grasslands**, which is principally funded by a large grant from National Grid following network improvement works they have carried out in recent years.

### Grazing



The herd of Belted Galloways is still up on the main site and doing well – despite occasionally challenging weather! Importantly, they have all passed their TB testing.

The five separate areas (or “paddocks”) which they graze have been defined through the *NoFence* technology and the electronic collars the cattle wear. Each paddock has a permanent source of drinking water, and the herd stays long enough in each paddock to ensure that the land is thoroughly grazed before the cattle are moved on.

This is part of a process called “hefting” and means that the cattle spend long enough grazing each individual paddock to feel that they “belong” there, and this helps make sure that they effectively become part of its specific ecology.

Belted Galloways are ideal for this regime. Unlike bigger cattle which are commonly seen on flatter, lusher pastures, Belted Galloways are a tough breed, well-suited to thriving on challenging grassland that includes steep slopes. Each paddock is surveyed regularly to ensure that there is still sufficient vegetation for the herd to graze. Typically they stay in each paddock for around six weeks.



Last year's calves (right) are doing well and have already grown sufficiently big and strong to be fitted with their electronic collars. Although they look bulky to us, the collars feel relatively light to cattle and so individual animals quickly get used to wearing them.

The collars do, of course, have a built-in quick release mechanism. So if a collar becomes caught on, say, a fencepost or a tree branch, the animal itself can break free and re-join the herd. The collar can then be retrieved using GPS and the grazier can put it back on the cow's neck.



Three of the mature cows are now in calf from a new white bull which was brought to the site for breeding purposes. The bull itself doesn't ever come into the public access land on the Hill and Common and, after his work was done, he was taken back to Eddie the grazier's farm near Stroud. In April the pregnant cows will move to the Reversion field where they will peacefully graze, away from the main herd, until after their calves are born in early May.

From observations over the course of last spring and summer, both the spread and the abundance of wildflowers are improving because of the ending of grazing in the key spring and summer growing seasons. It is hoped that, over time, this will help other species - particularly butterflies, moths, bees and other pollinators - to increase in numbers. Naturally, though, other factors such as poor weather during the breeding seasons can - and do - hinder this recovery.

### **Limekilns**

The specialist contractor has now completed the planned works designed to help preserve the limekilns. This includes a concrete cap across the top of the kilns to help water to run off. A short length of the base of the kilns has also been re-pointed and the limekilns will be regularly inspected to see whether or not the re-pointed section shows signs of withstanding the weather better than the rest.

## Trees

Tree surgeons have been contracted to work on three old oak trees to help them into and, eventually through, the “veteran” stage of their life. Different species of trees naturally have varying lifespans. For oaks, they typically reach the mature stage at between 20 and 40 years, peaking at between 80 and 120 years. Between 150 and 180 years they begin to show signs of veteranisation and may be classed as ancient sometime between 300 and 400 years of age.

- Broadly speaking a tree becomes a **sapling** when it is about one metre tall and later enters the **juvenile** stage.
- It reaches the **mature** stage when it begins to bear fruit and continues to grow to its maximum height and spread.
- By contrast, an **ancient** tree usually displays a much reduced canopy while its trunk is conspicuously wider than other trees of the same species. It will also often show signs of its trunk becoming hollow and will generally have increasingly more fungi and animals living on or in decaying areas of wood.
- The **veteran** stage is a transitional one, and broadly describes a period when the tree has passed its peak of maturity and is beginning to exhibit characteristics of an ancient tree. However, many older mature trees do not get past the veteran stage which is why ancient trees are both rare and valued.

So the aim of the contractors’ current work is to help these three mature oak trees progress safely to the “veteran” stage of life. As large trees age, they tend to reduce the size of their canopy to help them remain stable. All the contractors have done is a process called “coronetting” which means trimming the canopy. This helps the trees remain stable and secure, and gives them a better chance of surviving into and through their veteran stage.

## Gorse and Scrub

The contractors have re-visited the first steep slope they cleared of gorse three years ago. With experience we have learnt that gorse needs to be cut harder and lower than was achieved first time around and the team has also become more adept at applying the herbicide effectively. As there have been signs of re-growth in that first area and they have been cutting it right down to the ground and re-using the herbicide more rigorously to prevent future re-growth.



Digger with flail - photo by contractor

As for the mixed scrub in other areas, the contractor has been trying out a new technique. This time he has used a mini digger with a flail arm (seen left) which smashes the scrub down to 4 inches.

This new approach has been used to open up routes which have been narrowed by the spread of scrub. They started at the bottom of the area known as Fiveways, and also opened up a “bus tunnel” for essential vehicles using the track known as The

Gallops. Later they tackled sections of the Cotswold Way leading up from Hartley Lane and beyond. As a result, scrub has been pushed back from these routes and FOLK volunteers will now be able to maintain the newly restored width through periodic cutting and burning.

## **The Cotswold Drystone Wall**

National Grid grant funds have been used to buy another twenty tonnes of stone which the Cotswold Wardens will use to continue the re-building of about 30 metres of wall beyond the memorial wall.

## **OTHER PROJECTS**

### **Grass cutting**

In the past we used a tractor and mower to cut the grass on the Leckhampton Hill Common side of the hill and we used volunteers to rake and gather the cuttings. However, this has been too labour intensive for the volunteers. So for the past four years we have had a contractor using a quad with attached flail which both cuts and collects the grass. The arisings are then deposited in either the composting area of the site or in specific hollows where it can break down easily over winter. This year I decided to trial a new idea for the Hill Fort which hasn't been cut for three years. I had the grass flailed in the usual way but instead of cutting and collecting the whole 2Ha, only one third was cut and collected. In the remaining area the cuttings were left in place to see if they would dissipate and break down over winter. This will hopefully save time, effort and money. It will be interesting to compare the wildflower distribution in both areas this year.

## **Information Boards**

Following the completion of the re-surfacing of the accessible footpaths across the top of the Hill and Common, two information boards are being planned. They will be installed near to the access/exit points: one possible location is above Salterley Quarry and the other will be to replace the current board in Brownstones Quarry.

## **Protecting wildlife in Brownstones Quarry**

The flat area of the quarry bottom is host to a wide range of native orchids as well as a population of adders. The new earthwork work undertaken at Brownstones car park to reduce footfall across the quarry bottom has been in place for a while now. To help nature recover and thrive most people appear happy to go straight round to the footpath called Judy's Ride to reach the Hill and Common rather than taking the old shortcut across the quarry. We are grateful for this, but the quarry bottom does, of course, remain public land and can still be accessed at various points. Sadly, on a recent inspection, the undergrowth placed to deter people from accessing the area had been cut up and moved. This is a shame as the intention was not to stop people entering the area altogether as there are still access points. Rather, we really just wanted to try allow nature to recover without an increasing amount of dog fouling and footfall.

## **Youth engagement**

High School Leckhampton remains enthusiastic about helping its students to gain a good understanding of the many features which make Leckhampton Hill and Charlton Kings Common such an important site. In November a group of thirty students from the school's Eco Committee came up to join a FOLK Work Party. Half of the group were taken on a walk to explore aspects of the site, including the Belted Galloway herd. The cattle were more than happy for the students to stand near them for the obligatory selfies! Meanwhile, the other students joined in the work party tackling gorse and scrub cutting. They were also shown how the area of scrub cut by HSL students last year has remained grassland with no noticeable re-invasion by gorse, brambles etc. The groups then swapped activity part way through their visit.

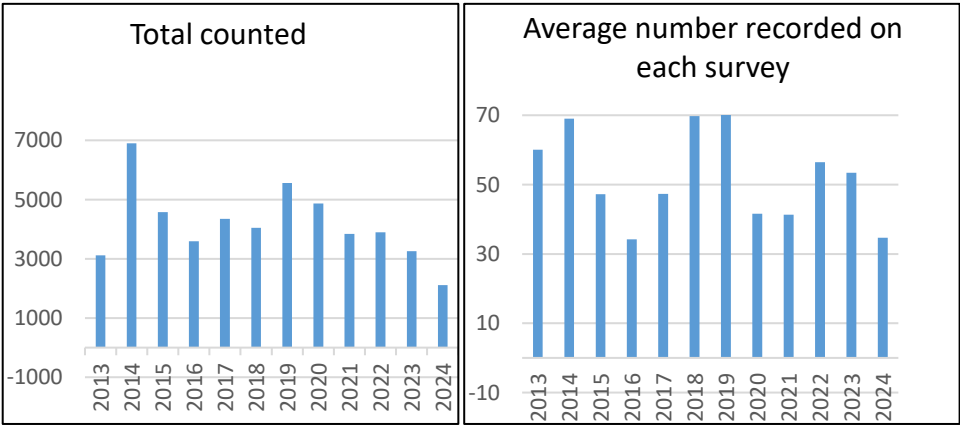
The Eco Committee is a popular and thriving group with ever more members – too many in fact to accommodate on one session. So the group's remaining students will be able to enjoy a similar visit and work party in the Spring.



# 2024 BUTTERFLY SURVEY REPORT

## for Leckhampton Hill and Charlton Kings Common

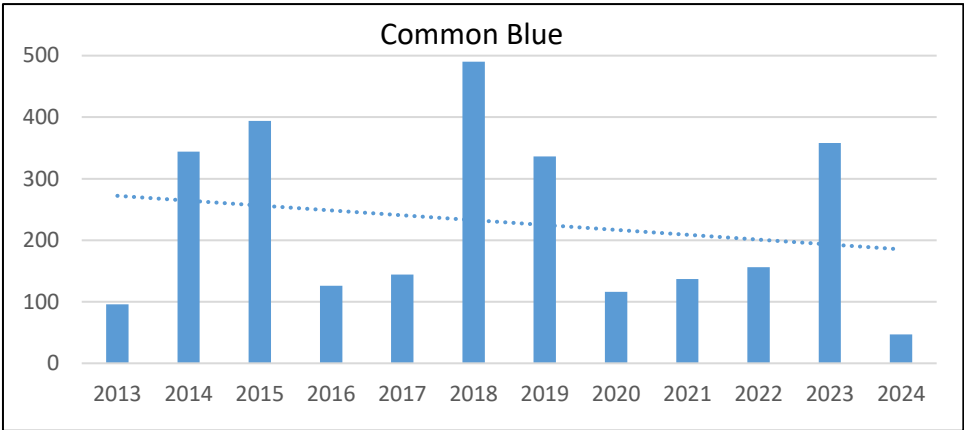
Despite the sometimes inclement weather during the recording season, a total 61 surveys were undertaken with 15 or 16 completed in each section. There were six periods in which none were completed: the 1<sup>st</sup> week in April, the 3<sup>rd</sup> in August with none at all in September. The latter was in part due to the very wet weather when 262mm fell in my garden, the highest monthly amount I have ever recorded. This even beat July 2007 (217mm) though to be fair, in that year 109 mm deluged us in just one day! The rapid decline in butterfly numbers seen throughout August also suggested that efforts to record would not add value to the information already gathered for the year. In total just 2121 butterflies were counted, consisting of 27 species. That however doesn't tell the whole story.



As the above charts clearly show, both the *Total Counted* and the *Average Number per Count* were the lowest since recording began in 2013. Notable by their absence were Painted Lady (a migrant that otherwise has been sighted each year other than 2020) and the Silver-washed Fritillary that has been seen every year apart from 2013. My hopes for the establishment of a colony of Adonis Blue on site after six males were spotted in 2023 do not appear to have materialised as no sightings were made this year. The Chalkhill Blue is just about hanging on, but with only two seen, their survival here is in the balance, especially as the weather

during their flight period in August was not ideal for breeding. The Small Tortoiseshell has gone from being one of the most common and easily recognised species (210 recorded in 2014) to just 1 sighting this year.

**Of particular concern is the decline in both Common Blue and Brown Argus.** Last year they seemed to be recovering, but unfortunately this did not continue as is clearly shown by the trend line for the Common Blue on the graph below.



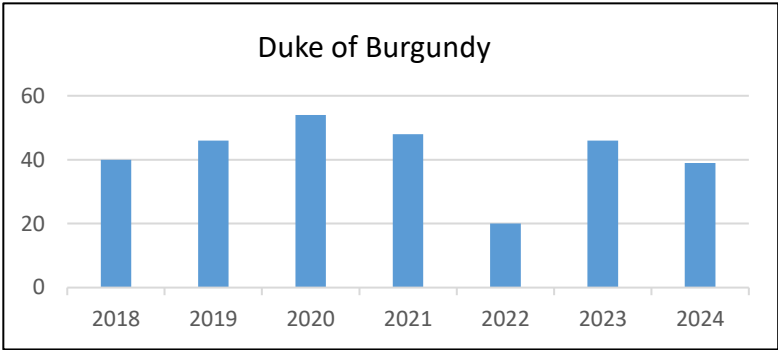
Although Charlton Kings Common is a more extensive in area than Leckhampton Hill, both species tend to be more abundant in the latter, though they do suffer from great variation in numbers year on year.

This means that the change to the grazing regime (which was instigated two years ago in the hope of increasing the spread of wildflowers and so supporting greater butterfly numbers) has not as yet had the desired effect on Charlton Kings Common. The wildflowers have increased but, based on this year’s observations, Common Blue and Brown Argus numbers have not

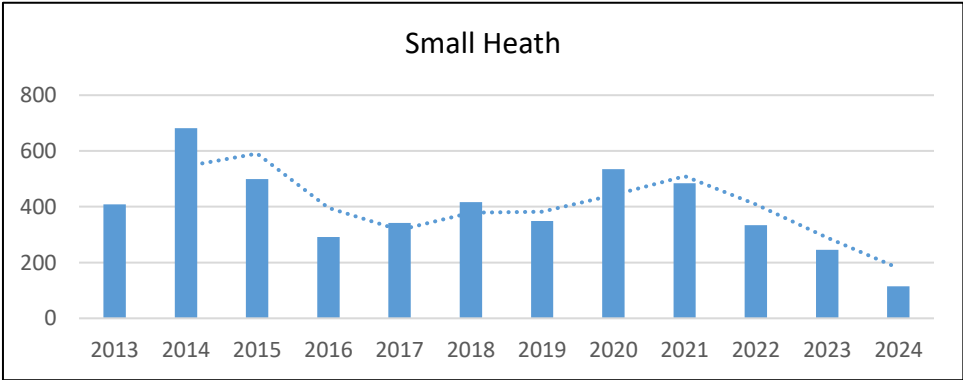
These closely related butterfly species have similar habitat requirements, but use different larval food plants (Birds-foot Trefoil and Common Rock-rose respectively). However, as both of these plants are abundant and widespread on site, the butterflies do not compete for this resource, and so there must be some other reason for the wide fluctuation in numbers year on year.

Since timed counts for the nationally endangered Duke of Burgundy started in 2018, numbers have remained reasonably stable.

These butterflies have slightly extended their range over the lower slopes of Charlton Kings Common while seeming to abandon the Cowslip Meadow. However ash trees and other scrub have been cleared between these two areas creating a flight path. So maybe they will return there in future.

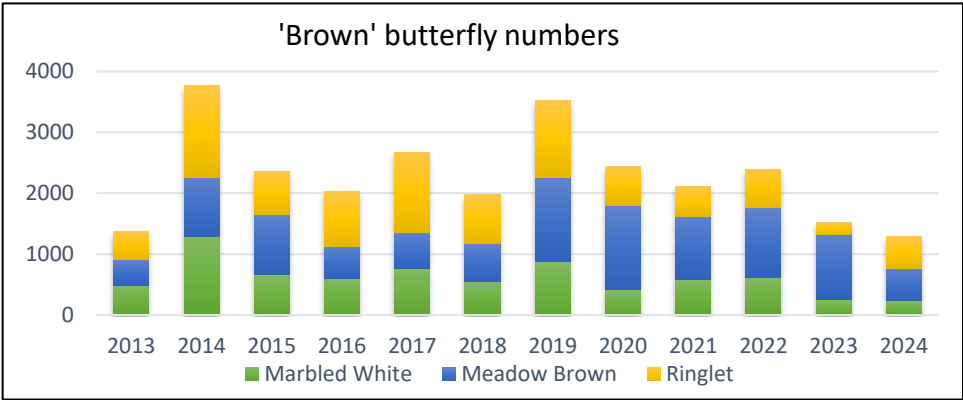


Small Heath, a species that is usually well represented, with the majority flying from the end of May to mid-July, had disappointingly low counts in that period. Whereas there is usually a partial second generation, it hardly showed any signs of that this year, with only four sighted after 1 August. As a result, the number recorded were by far the lowest since 2013, and the 2 year trend line reflects this graphically.



Of the other ‘brown’ species, Marbled White, Meadow Brown and Ringlet numbers have fluctuated markedly over the years, with a general decline in all. The 2013 figures are not a direct comparison as the survey area then did not include the Hopkins fields.

These are species that have a preference for areas where the grass grows long and lush, which probably explains why they were more abundant on Leckhampton Hill due to the lack of grazing pressure. However the more recent decline in numbers might be due to more frequent droughts in the growing season that have been experienced in the last few years, albeit then often followed by heavy and/or persistent rainy periods. The comparison omits the data from the Cowslip Meadow and Hopkins Field as the management there is less consistent year by year (ranging from none to grazing, mowing for hay and topping in the autumn) whereas parts of Leckhampton Hill are mown on a rotational basis, so there is less fluctuation.



**So were there any winners this year? In a word – no.** After a slow start, Speckled Wood managed to reach 80% of its long term average, Gatekeeper and Brimstone both reached 90% but Meadow Brown and Ringlet fell to just 60%. The previous edition of FOLKtalk featured an article about the 2024 Big Butterfly Count - a survey whose results prompted Butterfly Conservation to declare a nationwide ‘Butterfly Emergency’.



At the time I felt it was possible that the data which that survey produced might have been symptomatic of a one-off or short-term decline in numbers due to factors such as weather. Sadly the final results from our local survey did nothing to support my earlier optimism, and generally reflected the results of the Big Butterfly Count. It is true that some species fared better than others, but on our site all were less abundant than the long term average. For example, the number of Ringlet (523) were more than double than in 2023 (194), as reflected in the Big Butterfly Count but even so, less than half than the figures for 2014 (1511), 2017 (1324) and 2019 (1262).

**I will continue to try to direct some of our winter habitat management** with the aim of not just keeping the survey routes open but also to try to enhance particular areas for all invertebrates, not just the butterflies. The change to the grazing regime on site by the restricting the grazing in the summer months has not yet resulted in the increase in numbers hoped for, but maybe when combined with the impact of active management by FOLK and contractors, some improvement might be seen soon. Indeed, if these measures had not been undertaken, the position might possibly have been even more dire. I can only hope that 2025 will prove to be a better season, both from the weather and butterfly perspective.

Finally, my thanks must go to the three surveyors, Peter Sands, Fiona Knee and Andrew Bishop who have continued to walk the Hill and Common to count the butterflies despite some very frustrating and disappointing results.

***If anyone else would like to help with surveying in 2025, please do get in touch.  
The more eyes watching for changes the better!***

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January 2025

## ST ANDREW'S CHURCH SPIRE

A key role for FOLK in preserving Leckhampton Hill is the work we do to look after the site's extensive quarrying history. This includes caring for places like Salterley Quarry, Brownstones Quarry and Dead Man's Quarry, as well as the tramways, the sidings and the early 20<sup>th</sup> century limekilns.

Stone from Leckhampton's quarries was widely used across the town, especially during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries when Cheltenham saw rapid expansion. It proved to have an attractive colour and was relatively easy to cut, shape and carve, but - like all similar stone - is prone to natural weathering. This is precisely the challenge currently being met by St Andrew's Church in Montpellier which is believed to have been extracted from Salterley Quarry off Hartley Lane.



Salterley Quarry



St Andrew's Church ©Anne Strathie

For almost 140 years – since its completion in the mid 1880's – St Andrew's church spire has stood tall above the junction of Montpellier Street and Fauconberg Road, but it is now undergoing a thorough programme of repair and restoration. FOLK was very pleased to be among local organisations invited by the church to a meeting to explain the project. There were two main speakers: Bob Alger, one of the church's Elders (also Chair of their Premises Committee) and conservation architect Steve Sedwell, who carries out Quinquennial (five-yearly) Inspections of the church.

Repairs to the spire had taken place in the early 1960s, but after Steve Sedwell noticed a slight twist at the top of the spire in 2009, a full survey was done and regular monitoring continued. The current project was specified in the 2019 "Quinquennial", the required five-yearly survey of the fabric of a church.



St Andrew's Church ©Anne Strathie

However, COVID-19 issues significantly delayed the start of the works, but the scaffolding was eventually erected in autumn 2024 and an even closer examination of the stone was undertaken as the dismantling of the upper spire began. This revealed further complications.

The spire's stonework had, it appeared, not only suffered long-term weathering, but also distortion and damage caused by rusting Victorian metalwork.

Those problems had been further compounded by the 1960's repairs. These had been done at a time when the importance of using lime mortar rather than cement mortar to repair old stonework was not fully understood.

In brief, cement mortar is harder and more impermeable than the Jurassic limestone used in the construction. That in turn not only increases the stresses on the stonework, but also leads to water being trapped within the stones themselves and further degrading the very fabric it was meant to preserve.

**The specialist stonemasons have already dismantled the upper sections of the spire.** The slender top section was found to have been reinforced with a central iron pole and a cross-tree of tie-rods. This would have been entirely in line with common building practice for late Victorian churches. However, this section of St Andrew's spire had also had cement poured into it, encasing the original ironwork and permanently bonding it to the stonework itself. Over time the iron rusted, causing yet more damage to the stone.

In general, stonemasons working on restoration projects like this prefer to use as much of the original stone as possible. As a result of that concrete infill, however, it has not proved possible to re-use any of the tip's original stones. Moreover, as lower tiers of stonework were dismantled, the use of cement mortar during the earlier repairs was found to have caused an additional problem not visible from

the exterior of the spire. The trapped water had, in fact, caused a significant number of stones to develop vertical fissures which render them too unstable to be renovated and put back in place. These stones have been marked with red dots (example seen right) and they will be replaced by the stonemasons using new stone.



Given the many challenges, and the depth of skill and knowledge needed to complete a task like this, it will be fascinating to follow the work at St Andrew's as the works progress.

\* \* \* \* \*

At FOLK we are accustomed to the challenges of preserving the remains of a long history of quarrying, but we are also aware of the widespread local use of Leckhampton stone. So the opportunity to attend this open meeting at St Andrew's was very welcome. It not only gave us a detailed understanding of one specific conservation project, but it also shed a light on both the importance and the technical complexities of maintaining buildings made with Leckhampton stone, a vital feature of our town's architecture.



# FOLK AGM 2024

The fifty or more who attended the AGM at The Wheatsheaf in November were greeted by a display of FOLK activity over the past year. As well as summarising the history of quarrying on Leckhampton Hill, this set out various achievements including rising membership numbers, increased work party activity, the resurfacing of footpaths, and conservation grazing.

## Introduction

In his opening remarks Mike Donnelly began by noting that, in the coming year, FOLK will celebrate its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary. He emphasised that this milestone offers FOLK the opportunity not only to reflect on its achievements, but also to look to the future.

The past year's work party efforts have been a blend of month-by-month land management tasks and active support for the many projects which have been undertaken by contractors thanks to the three-year National Grid grant – a funding stream which has now been extended up to the end of 2025 to enable further important works to be completed. These include ongoing projects for veteran trees, ash die-back and clearing some end-of-life larch trees, as well as the new secure grazing area in Daisybank Field and the purchase of stone for the rebuilding of the drystone wall.

Mike also noted FOLK's presence at the recent Party in the Park – a Cheltenham Borough Council initiative both to entertain and to support struggling families in our town. This, alongside FOLK's presence at community events like the Charlton Kings Fayre and High School Leckhampton's "Eco Day" help not only to increase public awareness of the beauty and complexity of Leckhampton Hill and Charlton Kings Common, but also help to raise the profile of FOLK itself.

## Activity

Mike's report paid tribute to the wide range of activities which FOLK has undertaken. So much of what FOLK achieves depends on the tireless contribution of the many Work Party volunteers and Mike also congratulated the new team of coordinators and work party leaders who have completed a very successful first year. He was keen to acknowledge to support from many local businesses who released staff volunteers to work alongside FOLK's own work party members.

Average attendance at a work party is now sixteen, but has been as many as thirty-five. The year had seen a total of thirty three work party sessions, amounting to 1641 volunteer hours up on the site. In addition there has been an increased investment in hand tools and training on subjects such as brushcutting, first aid and the use of chemicals.

Beyond that, Mike noted events like the wildlife walk, FOLK Quiz Nights, the partnership with High School Leckhampton, and FOLK's support for magnificent work undertaken by the Cotswold Voluntary Wardens in re-building more and more of the Cotswold drystone wall leading up from Hartley Lane. This has included the creation of the new memorial wall. He also commended the very supportive partnership with our new grazier and the team of volunteer "cattle spotters" who help ensure the welfare of the cattle who graze the site.

### **The focus of our work**

The tasks which FOLK addresses remain focused on a range of aspects of the site: the quality of its habitats, the diversity and sustainability of its wildlife, its quarrying history and the opportunities which it provides for local residents and our countless visitors to benefit from close contact with nature. So, as well as work on natural habitats, FOLK has supported both the preservation of the Limekilns and the creation and maintenance of the accessible paths around the top of the Hill.

Mike also reported that the current collaboration with Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust to boost the population of Adders on the site already appeared to be making a positive difference. The Adder and the Duke of Burgundy butterfly are the two most endangered species which live on the Hill and so they are naturally a focus of special attention in our management of the habitats across the site. Natural England are impressed by what is going on and are working towards having the site designated as a National Nature Reserve.

The meeting was told that during 2023-2024, **a total of 2,560 volunteer hours** was gifted towards our conservation & education activities, training and behind the scenes admin.

***FOLK is grateful for the continued unwavering and generous support of its members, volunteers and Committee team in delivering this tremendous effort.***

## **Getting the word out about FOLK**

FOLK has 515 members and we continue to offer membership free of charge. Our Facebook page remains popular, with over 2,600 subscribers and the FOLK website continues to act as a significant resource for members, local residents and visitors; this will remain at the centre of our plans to develop FOLK's digital records database going forward. The FOLK newsletter FOLKtalk is also an important voice to our membership as we explore new ways of communicating with our followers and volunteers.

## **Looking to the future**

FOLK remains committed to its core purposes of conservation and education. So Mike described how the Executive Committee plans to make sure that FOLK puts its future efforts to best use - for the benefit of nature and to enhance people's enjoyment of the site.

In a wide-ranging review the Executive Committee re-visited FOLK's original aims and objectives, and went on to consider in more detail aspects such as habitat management in a Site of Special Scientific Interest, the "green agenda" and the need to both engage with and support our diverse local population, including young people and those with disabilities.

More detail about the outcomes of this review will follow during 2025.

## **Financial Report**

The finances are in a healthy state, despite the continuing suspension of membership fees. This is due to a combination of reduced expenditure along with the receipts of grants.

In 2022-23 our funds were reduced by a significant one-off investment in new machinery. During 2023-24, however, expenditure returned to a more normal level and FOLK also benefited from a number of fund-raising events and earned £282 from members' participation in the Cheltenham Lottery.

On top of that, FOLK was successful in applying for a number of grants. These include contributions from Gloucestershire County Council, Cheltenham Borough Council, Leckhampton with Warden Hill Parish Council, Shurdington Parish Council and Charlton Kings Parish Council (which made no charge for room hire). In addition, several FOLK members made important financial contributions including

Anthea Jones, Adrian & Cassandra Phillips, Russell Smith, Don & Brenda Ainscow and Peter Whalley.

As a result, FOLK's net reserves provide a modest, but prudent, financial buffer. This proactive approach to funding also 'future-proofs' FOLK financially to the end of 2025, allowing us to continue to pursue our conservation and education ambitions.

## **Committee Matters**

Some current members will soon reach the end of their terms of office and there is a real concern that, if we cannot recruit some new members to the Committee, the ongoing viability of FOLK will be placed at risk. While eight members of the Executive Committee remain in post, there are currently three vacancies and, sadly, at the time of the AGM no nominations had been received for these positions.

## **Q&A**

### **1. What is the current state of the new Site Management Plan?**

In reply it was noted that the first draft is due to reach the committee by the end of 2024. The plan will include an analysis of the current state of the site with recommendations for future aims and objectives and a summary of the actions needed. The draft plan will be reviewed by the Committee and others before any implementation plan is drawn up.

### **2. Has Tewkesbury Council been approached for any grant support as much of the land falls within its boundaries?**

This to be followed up when more grant funding is required.

### **3. A proposal was received for a vote of thanks be made to Geoff Holt for his ten years of service as Work Party Co-ordinator, bearing in mind the breadth of his duties and the thousands of hours of volunteer time which he has overseen.**

This was wholeheartedly agreed and the meeting responded with a long round of applause.



- 4. A proposal was received on behalf of Cheltenham Borough Council for a vote of thanks to the Executive Committee and the many volunteers for all the work FOLK contributes to the management of Leckhampton Hill and Charlton Kings Common.**

This too was wholeheartedly agreed.

**Finally, Mike Donnelly thanked the Committee for its support over the past year and declared the meeting closed.**

### **GUEST TALK**

The gathered audience was then treated to a fascinating talk by local historian **Stuart Manton** on the creation and evolving nature of the local area originally known as “South Cheltenham”. This encompassed 200 years of development and ongoing change in The Suffolks, Bath Road, Park Place, Shurdington Road and, of course, Leckhampton itself.

Stuart ended by telling the meeting about a website which contains a great deal of detailed information which members might find interesting. It contains a wide range of material about the history and more recent developments in Tivoli, The Suffolks and Bath Road.

To find out more follow this link [www.cheltenhamsouthtown.org](http://www.cheltenhamsouthtown.org)

# WORK PARTY REPORT - SPRING 2025

## Pete Niblett – Work Party Coordinator

As I write this article we are well into the winter season, and unsurprisingly our major task has been attempting to keep on top of the gorse, whilst trying to avoid the elements! Since the start of November we have had to cancel three work parties because of bad weather, but managed to arrange an additional one in December. Overall in 2024 an average of 16 volunteers turned up at each work party.

At this time of year, after the birds have fledged, we set about our annual maintenance tasks. There's a lot of cutting done, but we barely keep the gorse from spreading into the rare grassland habitats. Young gorse provides better cover and protection than older, 'leggy' growth, so the result of our efforts is that the habitat as a whole is improved.

Our efforts have focused largely on three areas so far this season - on the Hill, the slope above Hartley Lane - the Salterley Quarry side; on the Common, the diagonal path above Shackleton; and both ends of the ledge/shelf (seen below) that runs parallel to the Cotswold Way at the western end of the Common.



The highlight for me this season and my focus for this article is working in partnership with other organisations. High School Leckhampton (HSL), the Cotswold Wardens, Malvern Hang Gliding Club, Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust and

Corporate business. Cheltenham Borough Council (CBC) has supported us on a number of tasks.

Although our main task is creating the right habitat for flora and fauna, it is not the only reason we work on the Hill. It is also about enhancing the views of the surrounding landscapes that the site provides, maintaining access for users by keeping the paths clear of encroaching growth.

In the spring and summer our attention turns to maintaining the integrity of the site's popular landmarks/features such as Cotswold stone walls, the burial mound and the limekilns.

### **Cotswold Wardens - Leckhampton Hill**

We had our first joint task with the Cotswold Wardens in December. Our task was to remove gorse from either side of the path that runs along the slope above Hartley Lane. This south/west facing aspect is one of the best areas on site for flora and fauna; the only area on the hill with this alignment. In July 2014, more than a hundred butterflies were counted dancing above this slope. In addition it is the home of the Chalkhill Blue butterfly – possibly the last remaining colony on the site.

Thirty two volunteers from both organisations turned out – an even split! Large areas of gorse and bramble were cleared on either side of the path and all of the arisings were burnt by the end of the session. A range of both machine and hand tools were used to tackle the scrub. The areas cleared will, over time, allow the spread of wild flowers and therefore enhance the habit for butterflies. Further work parties will be needed to continue to protect this special habitat but this was



a most impressive start. It demonstrates the effectiveness of working with other groups such as the Wardens when the need arises. And it was fun to share our coffee and mince pies in the company of other like-minded people!

FOLK volunteers returned to this area in early January on a cold and frosty morning. The aim was to continue to clear more gorse and scrub from this species rich habitat. A fire provided welcome warmth for the hardy volunteers.

### **High School Leckhampton**

What a day. We were fortunate to have bright sunny conditions for the visit of thirty year 7 to year 10 pupils, and staff from High School Leckhampton. The task was to clear a large area of gorse on the ledge below the Cotswold Way on the western side of Charlton Kings Common. The aim – to control the spread of gorse, enhance the views of Cheltenham and beyond, as well as to encourage the spread of wild flowers.

Working with great enthusiasm and energy the pupils more than achieved our objectives. In addition to the seven FOLK volunteers three Cheltenham Borough Council members of the Park Rangers team were also present to lend a hand.

The youngsters were divided into two groups. Whilst two year groups (Years 9/10) were taken on a walk over the Common, the other two year groups (Years 7/8) cut gorse. At half time the two groups swapped round. Before setting to work the pupils were given an explanation of what they were being asked to do and why, followed by a demonstration of how to use the tools safely and effectively.

The pupils got stuck into the task, cutting and sawing the gorse, working in pairs and dragging the brash to the fire site. The FOLK volunteers worked alongside them armed with dabbers to treat the gorse stumps. This was a real team effort and we did well to burn all the cut gorse. The pupils and staff, volunteers and CBC all contributed to what was a most successful, enjoyable and productive day. Round two will follow in March!

Two further work parties concentrated on clearing gorse on the eastern side of the ledge running west from the Windass Path. The aim was to open up the path to improve access and to enhance the views. Large areas were cut and the brash burned. In addition on both occasions the secondary task was clearing popular viewpoints along the Cotswold Way that had become obscured by undergrowth.



# Malvern Hang Gliding Club



This task didn't go as planned! Due to the forecast of heavy rain and strong winds I decided to cancel this joint work party which had been planned to clear/cut gorse from the Hang Gliders' take-off and landing area on the top of the Western side of the Common.

Despite the grim forecast, eight members of the Club were determined to go ahead and made a start on the task until the heavens opened late morning. In a relatively short time, though, they achieved their objectives – as the picture on the right show clearly shows.



## Corporate Volunteers

On one task we were joined by eight employees from a local company – there were also six FOLK volunteers. The objective was to collect and burn gorse cut by Silver Tree Services who were working on the slope above the diagonal path that runs above Shackleton. The other aim was to create gaps in the thick gorse on the left hand side of the path - this is to encourage the cattle to go in to reduce the sward, create firebreaks and connect grassy areas.



After an explanation of why we do what do, and how to handle tools, we set to work. We successfully achieved our aims and created gaps in the gorse and burnt most of the brash left by the contractors. The cattle will be grazing this area and will set to work by munching away on all this newly exposed grass! A big thank you to all local employees who chose to spend their time with FOLK.

We spent another three work parties in this area collecting and burning the remaining gorse cut by the contractors on the slope above the path - they have now opened up a large swathe of grassland. In addition, we continued to remove stands of thick gorse to create a path/trail to grassy areas further down the slope - necessary for butterflies and other insects to reach flower rich areas more easily. There was evidence that the cattle are wandering into this newly opened up area!

### **Fire on the Common!**

This task was all about burning-off the cut gorse left by previous work parties and by the CBC contractors. The only good thing I can ever say about gorse is that it burns well! Unfortunately this makes it ideal for those who like to start the occasional wildfire. (That's why we burn it off promptly.)



22 Dec 2024 Firefighters on the Job!  
Photo: FOLK

So we're grateful to the person who called the fire brigade when they saw the smoke. The firefighters were also pleased when they saw a well-controlled fire with adequate equipment and personnel around it. They'd much rather come out to this than an uncontrolled blaze. I'm not sure they enjoyed the climb up the slope too much though!

**As you can see, there is always plenty to do.** So, if you, or anyone else you know, would like to join in, please do come to any of our FOLK work parties. You can work at your own pace and take a break as and when you wish.

Work Parties are usually held on the second Thursday, third Tuesday and fourth Sunday of each month. Details of the dates and meeting points for upcoming work parties are shown on the “FOLK Work Parties” page of the FOLK website. If we need to cancel a work party (usually because of bad weather) or change the meeting point, details will be posted on the FOLK website and sent via a Work Party WhatsApp group to existing volunteers.

We meet at 9.30am, normally at Tramway Cottage Car Park, Daisy Bank Road, and are on the hill for approximately three hours. Tools are provided by FOLK. For your own safety we ask you to wear stout footwear and bring tough gardening gloves.

For further information you can contact Pete Niblett on 07857 939072 and I would happy to answer any questions. Alternatively please go to our website where you will find the ‘**FOLK Work Parties**’ page on the right hand side of the homepage, or click on this link: <https://www.leckhamptonhill.org.uk/work-parties/>

Otherwise, just send an email to [folk.workparty@gmail.com](mailto:folk.workparty@gmail.com) and we will get back to you.

## ABOUT FOLK

FOLK is an organisation set up to work with landowners to promote the conservation and management of the ecology, geology and archaeology of Leckhampton Hill and Charlton Kings Common. We support sustainable recreational and agricultural use of the land. We welcome new members to support and help us in this important work. If you wish to join (either as an individual or as a family) please contact any of the people listed below. ***There is currently no fee for membership.***

Why not have a look at what is new on the FOLK website <http://www.leckhamptonhill.org.uk/> and look us up on Facebook - *Friends of Leckhampton Hill and Charlton Kings Common*.

**Contributions to the FOLK Website are always gratefully received.**

**Contact:** [webmaster.leckhamptonhill@gmail.com](mailto:webmaster.leckhamptonhill@gmail.com)

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**If you have any comments on the Newsletter or would like to contribute an article** to the next edition please contact **Martin Wood** on **01242 231230** or send an email to: [martinwood360@gmail.com](mailto:martinwood360@gmail.com). Articles of around 500 words, plus a photo if you have one, would be most welcome at any time.

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Find the ***Friends of Leckhampton Hill & Charlton Kings Common*** on [www.leckhamptonhill.org.uk](http://www.leckhamptonhill.org.uk) and on Facebook

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